



Migrants No More

Mexicans used to come to California's San Joaquin Valley to work the harvest and go home. But now the migrants are settling in—and so is a stark, new kind of poverty.

By Maggie Jones

Photographs by Gregg Segal

It is night when the day begins.

At 4:30 a.m. in a dusty farming town in California's San Joaquin Valley, the lights are on in a one-room house no bigger than a garage. Inside, Isabel makes tortillas and beans for the workday ahead, while her husband, Vicente, puts on his farmworker's uniform of long pants, long-sleeved shirt, work boots, and a baseball cap. Much of the town of Arvin is awake by now: The local *panaderias*—Mexican bakeries—open at 5 a.m., as do the small markets where farmworkers buy gas and pick up coffee before heading to the fields.

By 5:40, Isabel and Vicente have joined a caravan of more than 40 cars, vans, and pickup trucks, with their lights on, rolling past acres of grapes, potatoes, and onions. The road turns from potholed concrete to sand before dead-ending at a line of cherry trees that seems to stretch for miles. As some 200 farmworkers, in groups of three and four and five, walk down a dirt path into the fields, Isabel secures the shield of bandannas she wears to protect her skin from the sun and dust: One ties around the top of her head while the second falls down the back of her neck, like a tent flap. The third is fastened bandit-style, high and tight over her nose and mouth.

Vicente will spend the day on a 12-foot ladder, pulling bunches of cherries from the tops of the trees, while Isabel twists the fruit off the branches below. Over the next seven hours, with one 15-minute break, Vicente will pick more than 100 pounds of cherries, dumping them into deep trays harnessed to his shoulders. His pay will depend on how quickly he can fill the trays. No matter how fast he works, it's often less than minimum wage.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which portrayed the struggles of Okie migrants at Weedpatch Camp just a few miles from Arvin, drew national attention to the plight of California farmworkers in the 1930s. In the '60s, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers made the problems of the fields a part of dinner-table conversations nationwide. But though some union victories of the 1970s remain in place, conditions for farmworkers have grown more bleak in the past two decades. Real farm wages have fallen a full 10 percent since the '80s; in 1998, when the most recent survey was conducted, the average field worker made \$7,500 a year and had no health insurance or other benefits.

Vicente is 30 years old, short and strong, with a small mustache, a straight-ahead gaze, and a kind, slightly reserved manner; like the other farmworkers interviewed for this story, he didn't want his last name used. For 14 years, he has worked blueberries, cherries, grapes, oranges, watermelons, and onions. A scar wraps around his left index finger from the time he cut it to the bone with pruning shears. His ankle bears another scar, from the day he stepped on a blade in the onion fields. One summer he slept atop a flattened cardboard box in a vineyard. Another year, he lived in a two-room house near Santa Barbara with about 50 other men—"lined up like pigs," he says with a small smile. For eight years, Vicente followed the migratory route that Mexicans have traveled since they first



came to the California fields in the 1940s: He would enter the United States for the harvest and return to Oaxaca each winter to be with his family and build a house.

But that changed six years ago, when Vicente paid a coyote \$1,200 and filled a backpack with gallon jugs of water, tortillas, canned beans, and two changes of clothes for himself and Isabel, who was 14 years old and five months pregnant. They

left behind photos and mementos. ("If they catch you," Vicente says of the Border Patrol, "they'll take anything from you, even pennies.") Along with about 30 other migrants, Vicente and Isabel hiked across Arizona's Sonoran Desert for three nights, sleeping and hiding out during the day, when temperatures can reach 110 degrees.

The Sonoran Desert has been called "the cruelest place on earth." Last year, 409 immigrants died trying to get across—a sevenfold increase since 1995. Heightened border controls that began under the Clinton administration and escalated after 9/11 have effectively shut down migrant crossings near San Diego and El Paso, pushing migrants to ever more remote routes. Yet even now, with the Border Patrol's budget and manpower at an all-time high, about 800,000 undocumented immigrants arrive in the United States annually, up from 500,000 a decade ago, according to the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. A full 60 percent of them come from Mexico.

Many of those immigrants, like Vicente and Isabel, have no plans to go home again. "In the last 10 years, the rate of return to Mexico has fallen through the floor," says Douglas S. Massey, codirector of the Mexican Migration Project at Princeton University. "The risk of crossing isn't high enough not to come at all, but it's made immigrants think twice about going back and forth." In 2000, only 1 in 10 undocumented immigrants returned to Mexico within a year, according to the Public Policy Institute of California, a San Francisco think tank—almost 50 percent fewer than in 1992. In its effort to lock people out, the U.S. government has instead locked them in.

INITIALLY, VICENTE AND ISABEL did plan to return to Mexico, once they saved enough money. But then they had children—a son, now five, and two daughters, ages four and three—and migrating home became too expensive (coyote fees have tripled, to more than \$3,000 per person, since Vicente first crossed in the early 1990s) and too dangerous. The longer the family stayed in the United States, the less they wanted to leave.

Their story is like those of tens of thousands of farmworkers who once shuttled between Mexico and the United States. Migrants have settled because of the tighter borders, because of a 1986 amnesty program that legalized 1.1 million farmworkers, and because of changes in agriculture: The fruits and vegetables consumers now demand—strawberries, lettuce, broccoli—are more labor-intensive than the rice and cotton that once dominated the fields. And



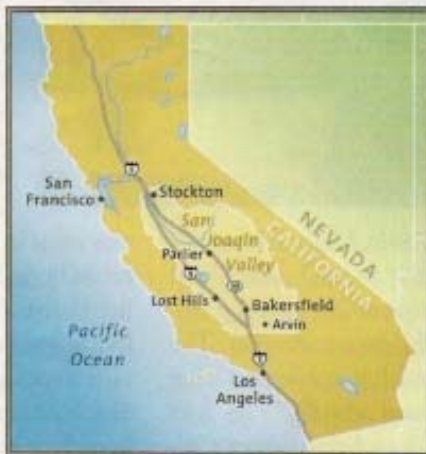
VICENTE, HIS WIFE, ISABEL, AND THEIR THREE CHILDREN SHARE A ONE-ROOM HOUSE SMALLER THAN SOME PEOPLE'S LIVING ROOMS—BUT THAT'S A STEP UP FROM THE TRAILERS (OPPOSITE) WHERE MOST FARMWORKERS LIVE.

Some have dubbed the San Joaquin Valley the “Appalachia of the West.” In fact, the per capita income in Appalachia is \$24,000. In Arvin, whose statistics are typical of farming towns in the Valley, the per capita income is less than \$7,500.

new harvesting methods have allowed growers to plant multiple crops in succession, providing work in some places for nine months or more each year.

In California, the settling of farmworkers and the growth of immigrant families have reshaped an entire landscape. The San Joaquin Valley—240 miles of the nation's richest farmland, stretching from Bakersfield in the south to Stockton in the north—has doubled in population, to 3.3 million, in the past three decades. Small farming towns that were largely Anglo for more than 100 years are now as much as 98 percent Latino, and bulging at the seams. In Arvin, where Vicente and Isabel live, the population has tripled in the last 30 years. Sixty miles farther north, the community of Lost Hills—overrun with dilapidated trailers and almond groves—has grown by a full 60 percent in just 10 years, becoming the most crowded community in all of California, with an average of 5.6 people in every home.

With the booming population of farmworkers has come a deep-seated poverty. Observers have dubbed the Valley the “Appalachia of the West.” Actually, the per capita income in Appalachia is \$24,000, about 80 percent of the national average. In Arvin, whose statistics are typical of small farming towns in the region, the per capita income is less than \$7,500.



Juan Vicente Palerm, an anthropologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara who has surveyed 200 rural farmworker communities like Arvin, says it's important to realize that the towns are “not overgrown labor camps, like some people believe,” but real communities where people are making their homes and putting down roots. Still, he warns, with more and more working families subsisting far below the poverty level, the San Joaquin Valley is becoming home to “a new rural underclass.”

Though it is just 105 miles north of Los Angeles, Arvin feels like a sleepy Mexican town, not altogether different from where Vicente and Isabel grew up in Oaxaca. Tumbleweeds roll across the small strip of storefronts, where the former Safeway is now a supermercado and Los Jarritos restaurant serves the best local tortillas. Each December the city celebrates the Festival of Guadalupe with a parade down the main street. And at Arvin High School, where the loud-speaker crackles with a mix of Mexican and American pop during lunch period, soccer is the top sport. "Ten years ago you could count the people on two hands who attended the games," says Blanca Cavazos, the high school principal and the daughter of a migrant worker. "Now we get 1,500 to 2,000 people at the semifinals." Shops that were once boarded up now sell tacos and *tamarindos*, and along the edge of town, new low-income housing developments offer some families their first shot at homeownership.

But alongside the pockets of hope, there is a deepening pool of need. During the winter months, when field work becomes scarce (and when migrants used to return to Mexico), requests to local social service agencies jump by as much as 400 percent, says Mona Twocats of the Community Partnership of Kern in Bakersfield—and that figure doesn't even reflect the depth of the problem. "Farmworkers are less likely to ask for help than others at the same income level," she says. "They rely on extended families. If they are undocumented, they are terrified of getting involved in any government program."

Many cities can't afford to build new schools, so lunches are held in shifts, and modular classrooms have sprouted everywhere. At Arvin High School, 72 percent of the 3,000 students qualify for the federal subsidized lunch program, compared with 44 percent statewide, and the student body is growing by as many as 100 children each year. The school now has seven modular buildings and has converted nine offices into classrooms. "We keep adding and adding," says Ana Maria Arreola, a support services worker for the school district's mi-



grant program. She lists the area's elementary and middle schools: Every one has a dozen modular buildings or more. About 300 kids are on the waiting list for Little League because there aren't enough ball fields.

Arvin's main streets are lined with tidy, single-family homes that house the city's teachers, health care workers, and some longtime farmworkers who have saved money or found jobs at the local packing plant. But behind those houses sit dilapidated garages and shacks converted to rental units, with tinfoil for curtains and power that comes from electrical cords trailing out of the main house. Along the back alleys and dirt streets where the poorer families live, kids swerve their bikes around potholes the size of tire wheels. Pick any plywood shack or rusted trailer and you're likely to

find two or three families sharing a bathroom, a couple of bedrooms, and a few hundred square feet. Arvin's rental vacancy rate is zero, notes city manager Enrique Medina Ochoa; he estimates that some 600 people in the town of 13,000 are waiting for a place to rent. If you're a newly arrived farmworker, he says, "you've got to live in a shack. Or with a family member."

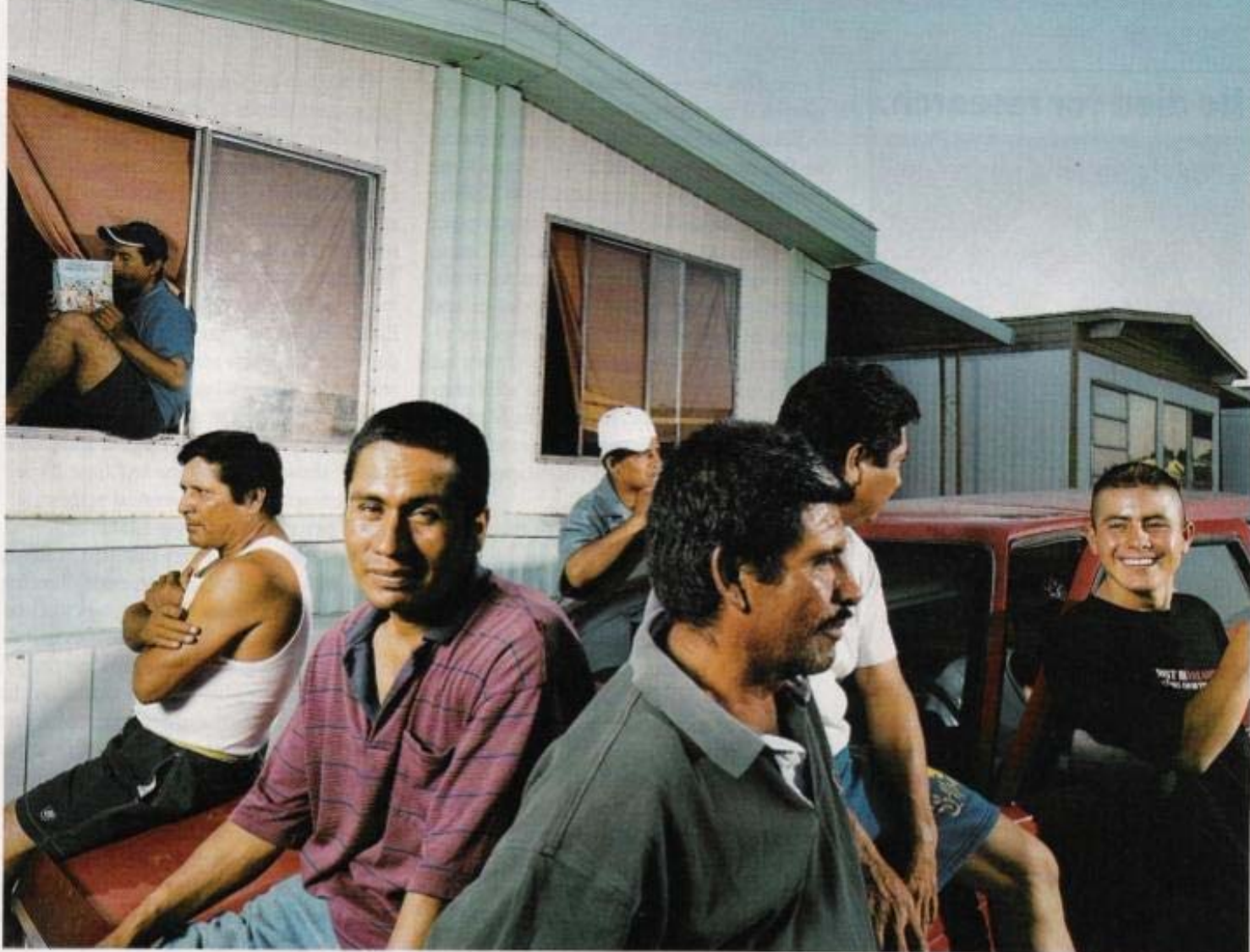
Vicente's family is luckier than some. Their one-room house is no bigger than a single-car garage; some nights his daughters sleep on the floor under blankets, other times the entire family piles into one bed. But the rent is a still-manageable \$280 a month. Down the road, in the town of Weedpatch, a field worker named Isabel lives in a house about the same size as Vicente's.

FOR THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO WORK THE SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY'S FIELDS, WAGES HAVE PLUMMETED—BUT WITH A STEADY STREAM OF NEW IMMIGRANTS READY TO TAKE THE JOBS, FEW COMPLAIN.

Her rent is about to jump to \$510. Families often sublet a room, or just a bed, to help pay the rent, but Isabel, a single mother of three, can't pack anyone else into the 300-square-foot house. Already, two of her sons share bunk beds, and her oldest sleeps in the car; four other relatives sleep on the floor, and she stays on the couch.

Still, a crowded house is a big step up from a trailer park like Sycamore Gardens. Ochoa says one of the trailers there doesn't even have a floor: "People walk on the two-by-fours." One woman at Sycamore pays \$650 a month for a small trailer that, when she moved in, had

rats' nests in the couch, a broken toilet, and blood stains on the bathroom floor. In the next trailer over, a 24-year-old woman named Flor, her husband, and their four children rent the living room—only the living room—for \$290 a month. Plywood, duct tape, and Pacific Grape stickers patch the broken windows. Another piece of plywood divides the room from the rest of the trailer, where another family lives. Flor would like a bigger place: "I'm hoping we can buy some-



IN PLACES LIKE SYCAMORE GARDENS, NEAR ARVIN, A SINGLE TRAILER IS OFTEN HOME TO A DOZEN MEN, OR A COUPLE OF FAMILIES.

Major growers don't hire their own farmworkers anymore. In the San Joaquin Valley, as many as 90 percent of farm laborers work for contractors who do the hiring, handle payroll, and often run scams that shortchange workers.

thing next year," she says. But she and her husband make minimum wage in the fields—when they have work—and they still owe thousands of dollars to the coyotes who brought her and the children across the border at a cost of \$1,200 each. So for now, the family of six shares a room furnished with two beds, a refrigerator, a few shelves, and several boxes piled high with clothes.

ON A LATE AFTERNOON, after a day working the blueberry fields, Vicente opens the trunk of his car to reveal a cache of tools worth, in farmworker wages, a small fortune. "This one was sixty dollars," he says, picking up a three-foot pair of pruning shears. "This is about forty," he goes on, pointing to a two-foot pair of shears for grapes and oranges. There are a half-dozen other tools in the trunk, most of which need new blades every few months, at \$20 apiece. Then there are the gloves and goggles that he and Isabel need to protect their hands and eyes.

Farmworkers' tools used to be provided by the companies that

own the fields and groves. But most growers no longer hire their own field hands. Instead, the work is subcontracted to independent agents—a direct, if unintended, result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which holds companies liable for knowingly hiring undocumented immigrants. In the San Joaquin Valley, as many as 90 percent of farm laborers now work for contractors—many of them former farmworkers—who often take advantage of workers. Forcing laborers to buy their own tools is common; one contractor, Vicente says, tried to get him to shell out \$150 for a ladder to work in the olive groves, the equivalent of three days' wages.

Vicente guesses that he spends about \$400 each year on tools, a substantial bite out of the \$10,000 he makes. He knows that employers are supposed to pay double the minimum wage if workers supply their own tools; he knows, too, that in the winter, when field work withers and some contractors pay \$20 a day for tying and pruning the stubborn dried grapevines, they are breaking the law. "But what can you do?" he says. Bad work is better than no work,

He died for research.



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particularly since 28 percent of Arvin's population is unemployed in the best of times.

Some labor contractors "bounce checks or fail to pay anything at all," says Mike Meuter, a lawyer with the nonprofit California Rural Legal Assistance. "They pay piece rate when it's not the equivalent of minimum wage. They charge workers for tools. And they charge workers for rides to and from the fields." But most workers are reluctant to complain, particularly if they are undocumented and even more so if they are indigenous Mexicans—like the Mixtecas from Oaxaca, who have poured into the Valley in recent years and who often speak little Spanish, much less English.

Roy Gabriel, director of labor relations at the California Farm Bureau, says his group doesn't approve of contractors who break the law. But the growers leave the task of policing labor practices to the state, which has only 56 field inspectors responsible for 25,000 agricultural work sites. Workplace violations are so common that a 1998 federal study found that one-third of the agriculture sites surveyed violated minimum-wage laws. A 2001 investigation by the *Sacramento Bee* revealed that during a two-year period, 1,600 farmworkers lost out on a total of more than \$800,000 in wages—and those were just the cases in which claims were filed with the state.

NEAR SUNDOWN on a summer evening, the 90-degree heat is finally letting up. Mexican music wafts from a neighbor's house, and the bells of an ice cream truck jingle a few streets away. Isabel has changed out of the work clothes that she washes separately from the children's because of the film of pesticides from the fields. As she sweeps the back stoop, her three kids climb the branches of a tangerine tree, an unexpected bit of green in the dirt yard.

"School is the most important thing," Vicente says, explaining why he is raising his children in the United States. "I don't want them to work in the fields." Like migrants through the generations, he clings to the hope that his kids will have a better life. Some farmworkers even practice their own version of "scared straight": On Saturdays, mothers and fathers bring their sons to pull oranges and stuff them into 60-pound bags, or have their daughters cut grapes in the 100-degree heat. By Monday, most kids are eager to pile onto the school bus.

Though every farming town in the Valley has success stories of students who head off for college and into professional jobs, those cases remain relatively rare. Hans Johnson, a demographer with the Public Policy Institute of California, recently visited the town of Parlier, 120 miles north of Arvin. The town itself "didn't look so bad," recalls Johnson. "But then I saw the Department of Education scores, and I was appalled. I wonder what these kids are going to do." In several grades, up to 60 percent of Parlier High School students tested "below" or "far below" basic proficiency in English and math. And of those that took the SAT (just 20 percent, compared to 37 percent statewide), only 1 percent scored over 1,000.

The statistics aren't very different at Arvin High, which is why Jackson Serros, director of the school's migrant program, says teachers warn their students: "If you don't go to college, you're going to Grimmway University." In fact, a fair number of local kids do wind up at the Grimmway carrot packing plant, or at the Merry Maids cleaning service, or some other low-wage job in nearby Bakersfield.

But for many farmworkers in Arvin, those jobs are a step up. At Grimmway, there is air conditioning. The work is steady. There are no contractors, no tools to buy, no fighting to get paid. In winter, the work is still there, day after day. "No one ever calls in sick at the packing plant," says Serros. "No one misses a day of work. Every farmworker wants those jobs."

"Sometimes," Vicente says, leaning against his car, "I do get dreaming about something different. Maybe I'll go to Florida and do construction. It's hard work, too. But at least there's some money. I just want a stable job." I ask him if he ever thinks about working at Grimmway, and he shakes his head. "You have to have documents to get those jobs." It's almost 7 p.m. now. In an hour or two, he and Isabel will go to sleep so they can head back to the fields by dawn. ■

From the Mexican border to Modesto, California Rural Legal Assistance provides free legal aid to farm laborers. Learn more at crla.org.

The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (afop.org) is campaigning for living wages for America's 3 million farmworkers.

Founded nearly 40 years ago, the United Farm Workers now uses the Internet to fight for farmworkers' rights and immigration reform. Sign up for "Action Alerts" at ufw.org.